

Existing protections for press freedom continued to erode in 2014 due to the ongoing economic crisis and related political and societal tensions. In December, Parliament failed to choose a replacement for retiring president Karolos Papoulias, triggering parliamentary elections scheduled for January 2015. A number of analysts predicted a victory by the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) party, which pledged to end austerity policies and demand debt forgiveness from Greece's creditors.

The year's setbacks in the media environment included the questionable independence of the newly launched public broadcaster, New Hellenic Radio, Internet, and Television (NERIT); the granting of a nationwide monopoly to one company, Digea, for the operation of the country's network of digital television transmitters; and several instances of interference with content by politicians and media owners. The financial crisis continued to strain the resources and capabilities of private outlets, and political and legal pressure on journalists continued, especially regarding coverage of the government's controversial austerity policies.

Legal Environment

The constitution and various laws include provisions for freedom of speech and the press. However, there are some legal restrictions, particularly on speech that incites fear, violence, and public disharmony, as well as on publications that are obscene, offend religious beliefs, or advocate violence against the political system. Defamation and insult are criminal offenses, both carrying imprisonment as a possible punishment. Politicians and private actors launched a number of proceedings, including lawsuits, against journalists and other media workers in 2014. Following her publication in February of a blog post about the country's coast guard aiding police in guarding sensitive terrestrial sites, journalist Popi Christodoulidou was investigated under several articles of the military's penal code for publishing "sensitive information," although she claimed that she had published only publicly available information. In December, the Council of State—Greece's highest administrative court—upheld a fine against privately owned Alpha TV for content in a satirical program that was found to be too "extreme" and therefore not protected by the constitution.

The independence of the judiciary from political pressure was called into question following a number of rulings on politically sensitive issues in 2014. In May, the Council of State published a decision that the closure of the country's previous public broadcaster, the Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation (ERT), in 2013 was constitutional. Nevertheless, critics maintained that the closure of ERT by ministerial decree was characterized by a number of procedural irregularities, claiming that the court did not thoroughly consider these factors in its judgment. There were a number of lower court decisions in favor of ERT's former employees throughout the year, including rulings that invalidated dismissals. None of the decisions were enforced by the government in 2014.

The constitution establishes the right of access to information as stipulated by law, and a 1999 addition to the country's Administrative Procedure Code guarantees mechanisms for individuals to access documents created by public agencies, with some exceptions. Access to documents can be denied or restricted if they include information about national security, criminal investigations, or the personal lives of individuals.

There were few changes to Greece's murky regulatory environment for broadcasting in 2014, despite a number of Council of State rulings in recent years on unconstitutional practices in the field. The most recent licensing tender was held in 2002 for radio stations and in the late 1990s for television stations; these

licenses have since expired. The government has instead issued successive one-year extensions of the licenses. In December 2014, extensions were again given to Athens-based radio stations and to television stations nationwide. This practice has continued despite a 2011 decision by the Council of State declaring it unconstitutional. In lieu of a license, many stations rely on a “certificate of legality” that can be revoked at any time, while others operate without any legal status. Radio stations with a certificate are forced to operate on the same frequencies they utilized in 1999, even if state broadcasters or stations from neighboring countries have occupied the frequency. In October 2014, a new Council of State decision declared that Greece’s private radio stations are operating illegally.

A law passed in August permitted radio stations that are registered as news stations to change their legal classification to “non-news.” However, there are no legal pathways for non-news stations to change into news stations. Because of the lack of new licenses, this development has created major hindrances to the establishment of news stations, effectively preventing any new news stations from opening in the current licensing environment. The law also has the potential to insulate existing news stations from competition.

The law empowers the National Committee of Radio-Television (NCRTV) to regulate broadcasting; its seven members are appointed by Parliament. The terms of several members of NCRTV, including its president, ended in 2012, but they have remained in their positions despite the Council of State’s 2013 declaration that this situation is unconstitutional. The body has been accused of lacking impartiality and implementing regulations and penalties unevenly across media outlets, often based on the political connections of the outlet’s owners.

Political Environment

Political influence on content published by private and public outlets was apparent on numerous occasions in 2014, a year marked by the ongoing financial crisis, elections to the European Parliament in May, and preparations for legislative elections in January 2015. NERIT officially launched in May 2014, replacing interim broadcaster Dimosia Tileorasi (DT). The operations of NERIT, as well as of DT, were characterized by a number of irregularities and scandals over the course of the year, including what critics saw as the undue involvement of the Ministry of State in the broadcasters’ operation and administration. A law passed by Parliament in August stripped away NERIT’s administrative independence, granting the government the power to name its supervisory body, which is empowered to choose the broadcaster’s president. This action resulted in a complaint from the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) to the Greek government, as well as complications in the processing of NERIT’s EBU membership application.

Government influence at NERIT was observed on several occasions. In September, Greek media reported about accusations that, following intervention by government officials, NERIT blocked the airing of a speech by SYRIZA leader Alexis Tsipras at the Thessaloniki International Trade Fair, a traditional annual venue of major political speeches. A number of top officials from NERIT and its supervisory board subsequently resigned from their positions, citing excessive government interference in the affairs of the broadcaster. On multiple occasions throughout the year, NERIT gave extensive coverage to Prime Minister Antonis Samaras and his New Democracy party, including by airing political speeches and covering the party’s meetings. There were also a number of hiring scandals at NERIT, with reported cases of journalists gaining positions despite failure to meet the criteria set forth in the broadcaster’s hiring procedures. Furthermore, there were claims that NERIT received preferential legal treatment from the authorities in 2014. The broadcaster outsourced the operation of two of its four radio stations to private contractors, although private radio stations are prohibited from doing the same.

In addition to NERIT, a number of private television stations, radio stations, and newspapers also

presented largely progovernment coverage of political news over the course of the year. Prior to the European Parliament elections in May, ANT1 TV featured reports or text warning viewers of the negative consequences of not voting for the status quo through the parties of the existing government coalition.

There were reports of censorship, attempted censorship, and political interference in news reporting and journalism at a number of private outlets in 2014. In February, a Greek court attempted to prevent television station Mega TV from airing information about a shipwreck near the island of Farmakonisi that led to the deaths of a number of undocumented migrants; the court citing the need to preserve the integrity of an ongoing investigation. In April, media reported of accusations that the Greek government had directly intervened to change the language of a wire report from the Athens News Agency about an official state visit by German chancellor Angela Merkel to Greece. The report, based on a translation of a statement by the German Embassy in Athens, was reportedly altered to replace the phrase “austerity measures” with “consolidation measures.”

There were several attacks against media outlets and journalists in 2014, including incidents in which extremist groups or security forces assaulted journalists who were covering protests or other newsworthy events. In July, supporters of the far-right Golden Dawn party assaulted two photojournalists covering the trial of a Golden Dawn member in Athens. In June, journalist Tatiana Bolari was attacked by riot police while covering a protest near the Ministry of Finance in Athens. In September, a police officer received an eight-month suspended sentence for an attack against Bolari during demonstrations in Athens in 2011. In November, an arson attack took place against the offices of the weekly newspaper *Athens Voice*; an anarchist group claimed responsibility for the incident. In most cases of attacks against the media, impunity remains the norm.

Economic Environment

The audiovisual sector includes NERIT, more than 100 private television stations (including five major stations with national reach), and hundreds of private radio stations. The print sector has grown smaller in recent years, as circulation has fallen dramatically and many outlets have been forced to shut down due to financial strain. Major public and private outlets in Greece tend to report with a progovernment or partisan bias. There are several independent publications and websites, including some that portray the government unfavorably. However, many media owners have a close relationship with political actors, including members of the government, and this is often reflected in a lack of critical commentary on key issues.

Following the ERT shutdown in 2013—which resulted in numerous job losses—many former employees staged a sit-in at ERT facilities throughout Greece and continued some radio and television broadcasts. Some former employees continued this practice in regional facilities in 2014. Electricity cuts to one such location in Rhodes took a major transmitter off the air in December; shortly afterward, the facility was looted.

A 2007 media law requires that the main language of radio stations be Greek, and that radio stations keep certain funds in reserve and hire a minimum number of full-time staff. This places a disproportionate burden on smaller and municipally owned stations. The same 2007 law permits stations owned by political parties with representation in Parliament to operate without a license. An NCRTV decision in 2013 allowed Art TV, owned by the LAOS political party, to remain on the air because the party maintained a presence in the European Parliament, even though it was no longer represented in the Greek Parliament. After the May 2014 European Parliament elections, however, LAOS lost its European representation. Art TV nevertheless remained on the air in 2014, with no regulatory action as of the end of 2014. There are no

distinct legal provisions for low-power, university, or community radio stations to be licensed and to operate, and over the course of 2014, state and university authorities were reported to have attempted to shut down multiple student-run radio stations.

Although information on the ownership of radio and television outlets is available to the public, the exact structure of ownership is veiled by the holding companies and little-known entities listed in official records, and no ownership information is provided for print or online media. High concentration of ownership—including cross-media ownership—has also negatively affected media independence, as the media sector is dominated by wealthy businessmen with interests in shipping, telecommunications, and other industries. Six large multimedia companies dominate the sector—the Antenna Group, Lambrakis Press Group, Pegasus Press Group, Skai Group, Alpha Media Group, and Vardiniogiannis Group.

The company Digea was the winner of a government tender announced in 2013 for a nationwide license to operate the country's network of digital television transmitters. There was no other bidder in the process, which was heavily tailored to favor Digea. This has effectively created a monopoly, and any television station wishing to broadcast must pay monthly fees to Digea in order to utilize its transmitters, at a time when the media sector faces enormous financial and regulatory difficulties. Critics have noted that Digea, which is co-owned by Greece's largest private national television stations, has achieved this status despite a law prohibiting a network provider from also being a content provider.

The financial crisis and the resulting decline in circulation and advertising continue to adversely impact Greece's media sector. Numerous media outlets have shut down, reduced staff and salaries, scaled down or eliminated news departments, or failed to pay wages. Strikes, usually due to unpaid wages, have been frequent in recent years. At the end of 2014, many former ERT employees had still not received severance pay, while others were disqualified from receiving any or faced severance reductions.

There are significant barriers in the media market, especially in broadcasting, as the country's licensing and regulatory problems leave purchasing an existing station as the only way to enter the sector. Despite a 2012 law that permits unpaid employees at radio stations to take over station operations, and several decisions granted by the NCRTV in employees' favor in such cases, the government had not validated these decisions by the end of 2014. Sharply rising utility costs and prohibitive music licensing fees further contributed to the economic difficulties facing the media. Many outlets reportedly owe large sums in unpaid taxes and contributions to banks and the state, including for employee insurance funds. Nevertheless, the media sector is one of the few able to receive loans at a time when Greek banks have had to be recapitalized and when lending is highly selective. In 2013, Mega Channel, the largest private television station in the country, received a €98 million (\$128 million) loan from a consortium of banks.

This financial relationship connecting media outlets to banks and the government is one of the factors affecting not only content but also, reportedly, the placement of advertisement. Clientelism influences the allocation of state advertising, which is often issued based on political favoritism, rather than audience size, while the associated business ventures of major media owners are often favored for the awarding of public contracts and public works projects. Political parties also tend to advertise with outlets that provide favorable coverage; for example, *Hot Doc* magazine, which strongly and openly favors SYRIZA, is a major beneficiary of advertising from that party. In 2014, television stations were again exempted from a 20 percent tax on advertising revenues, which has not been collected since its introduction in 2010.

Nearly 63 percent of the population accessed the internet regularly in 2014, and access is generally not restricted. Many journalists and citizens utilize the internet to disseminate independent or alternative viewpoints.